



**Australian Government**

**Department of Social Services**

# **Reducing Sexual Violence**

**- research informing the development of a national campaign**

**Full report**

February 2022

**Commissioned by the Australian Government  
Department of Social Services**

*“If we are not thinking the same way, then we should be  
...it’s a big concern as a society if we don’t understand each other’s feelings  
...especially in the case of sexual behaviour and sexual advances.”*

(research participant)

**KANTAR PUBLIC**



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# Executive summary

## Background

As it is worldwide, sexual violence<sup>1</sup> is a **major health and welfare issue in Australia**. For those experiencing it, it can have immediate, medium-term, long-term and life-long detrimental impacts spanning psychological and emotional, physical, sexual, social, community and financial outcomes.

The 2021-22 Federal Budget confirmed the Australian Government's priority to address sexual violence, with an allocation of \$10.1 million for the Department of Social Services ('the Department') to develop a campaign regarding **consent and respectful relationships** to keep young people safe from sexual violence.

Qualitative (61 qualitative sessions) and quantitative (n=2,031 nationally representative surveys) were conducted among young people (10-17 years) and adult influencers (18+ years) in order to understand the starting point for sexual consent and its current understanding in Australia.

## Insight 1 – Sexual consent is on the radar but, is not well understood

Sexual violence and consent are not 'new' issues, however, over the last five years the topics of domestic violence and sexual consent have increased in their societal prominence. **Seven in ten (70%) Australian adults believe *the way people broadly think and talk about sexual consent is different now compared to a few years ago.***

However, aside from recognising things have generally changed, **many are unable to identify the changes and perceive a considerable 'grey area'** in the way consent is defined, can struggle to identify and empathise with the experience of non-consensual activity, and can default to victim blaming because of the lack of clarity relating to accountability.

As a result, **half (48%) of Australians are in a state of 'flux'** when it comes to sexual consent – they are conflicted in their understanding of the problem, have low confidence in their ability to define it, and perceive high risks of getting involved. Positively, however, this **state of flux is met by equal desire for clarity and leadership on the conversation** – three quarters (77%) agree the topic is personally important and 86% agree adults should talk to young people more about it.

## Insight 2 – Consent is considered a 'problem', for which it is difficult to find a solution

Conversations around consent largely remain centred around the 'problem', whereby **issues and challenges are readily identified, but there is less identification of solutions or mutually understood pathways forwards**. In part, this is driven by a perceived adaptation or change in definition over recent years, as well as a **lack of what this 'new' definition entails** and how it should translate into the way people should now act and behave.

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<sup>1</sup> Refers to sexual actions without consent. This can include coercion, physical force, rape, sexual assault with implements, being forced to watch or engage in pornography, enforced prostitution, or being made to have sex with other people. (The Fourth Action Plan 2019:60).



Because there is an absence of perceived solution, many people actively **avoid engaging with the topic** and there are a range of unconscious attitudinal responses which occur, including: deflecting responsibility for sexual consent towards females; empathising with male positions; disconnecting from female positions; discounting non-consensual behaviours through context (for example, alcohol etc).

### Insight 3 – Confusion about what consent is creates tension

While there is universal agreement that sex without consent is wrong, many perceive a range of **contextual and other factors that make the ‘real world’ situation much harder to navigate – for themselves, and even more so, to communicate with young people.**

Around **half (47%) believe *sexual consent has become a minefield for men, making it impossible to know what to do.*** This is contributed to by some division in understanding of some key elements of sexual consent regarding: whether consent can be withdrawn; whether it is easy to say ‘no’; whether the absence of a ‘yes’ implies a lack of consent; whether uninvited physical attention is in the realm of consent; and, whether asking for consent spoils the mood. On these elements, there is **inconsistent understanding between males and females.**

### Insight 4 – The perceived costs of joining the conversation can feel enormous

While there is widespread recognition and desire for the topic of sexual consent to be addressed, adult influencers appear aware that they are not necessarily on the same page (as above), and this generates perceptions relating to experiencing **potential personal costs of getting involved.** There is concern about: making the situation worse (for self, others and young people); having conversations too early, or too late; feeling exposed as a parent by not being able to answer all of the questions; and, knowing whether consent should be taught or learned.

Contributing to these perceived costs is a consistent sentiment of an **absence of generational role modelling on conversations relating to sexual consent.** It is considered a **‘new’ conversation, for which adults feel little or no guidance and few foundational experiences.**

These perceptions of personal costs and lack of role modelling reduce their likelihood to have conversations about sexual consent.

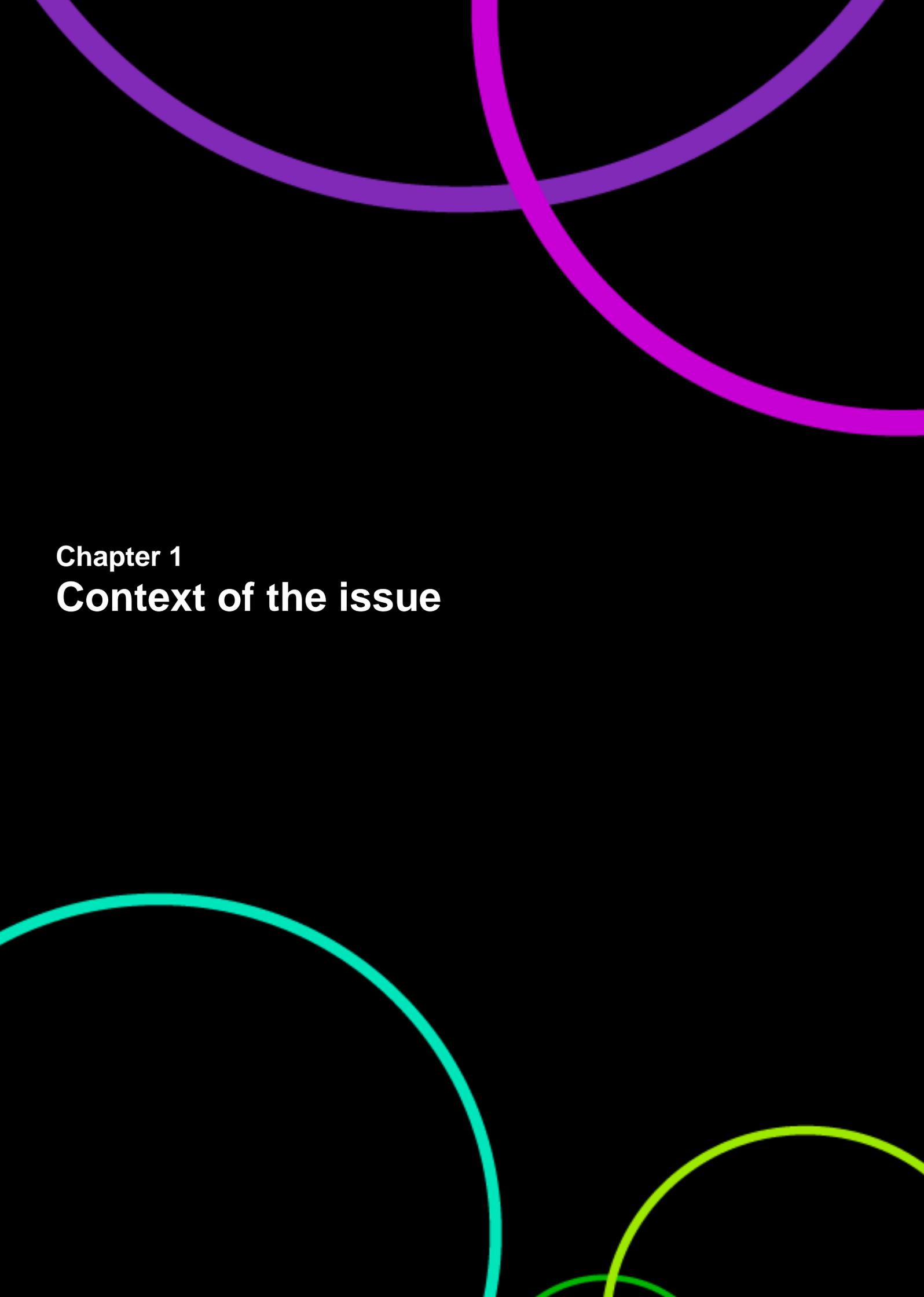


### **The heart of the challenge**

Sexual consent is a topic of high importance, and one that has changed over the years. However, while the conversation of sexual consent is more likely now to be on people's 'radars', it is no more likely to be a concept that has mutual understanding and clearly defined elements. As a topic, it feels confused, complex, weighty and risky ...for males and females alike.

The perceived complexities and lack of understanding mean that consent is often considered an 'unresolvable problem'. It is considered a subjective 'grey area' ...it can be thought of as something that is 'blown out of proportion' ...it can be seen as something that divides rather than unites males and females ...and there can be a perception that thinking about it can ultimately risk making life 'more complex'. As a result, people look for reasons not to engage deeply.

Australian adults have many questions about sexual consent ...*but*, ultimately, they hold them silently. Many feel paralysed in having conversations with young people, because it is understandably difficult to talk about something you are not confident you know intimately within yourself. It is considered too risky and even against social norms to initiate a conversation about consent with others. However, when conversations are held, confidence manifests, mutual benefits are experienced, and there is a greater willingness to openly share, learn collaboratively, and grow ...including with younger generations.



Chapter 1  
**Context of the issue**



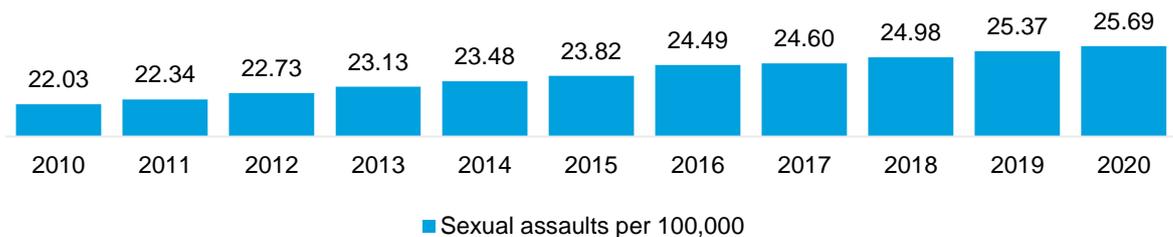
# 1. Context of the issue

## 1.1 The issue

As it is worldwide, sexual violence<sup>2</sup> is a **major health and welfare issue in Australia**. For those experiencing it, it can have immediate, medium-term, long-term and life-long detrimental impacts spanning psychological and emotional, physical, sexual, social, community and financial outcomes.

**Australians experience sexual violence at high rates**, and as indicated in the data below, these rates are **not declining over time**. The Australian Bureau of Statistics' ('ABS') Recorded Crime – Victims (2020) data, which reports the rates of sexual assault victimisation recorded by Police, indicates a consistent annual increase per 100,000 of the Australian population over the last decade, where the vast majority of reported victims have continued to be female (84.2 per cent female in the most recent 2020 data release).

**Figure: Recorded Victims of Crime – sexual assaults per 100,000 (ABS)<sup>3</sup>**



**Figure: Recorded Victims of Crime – sexual assault proportions by gender (ABS)**

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
<b>Male</b>	15.4	15.4	16.9	17.1	17.3	18.0	18.1	17.8	15.9	16.6	15.8
<b>Female</b>	84.6	84.6	83.1	82.9	82.7	82.0	81.9	82.2	84.1	83.4	84.2

Additionally, national statistics from the 2016 ABS Personal Safety Survey record that in Australia:

- 1 in 2 women (53 per cent) and 1 in 4 men (25 per cent) have reported being **sexually harassed** during their lifetime. And those that have experienced sexual harassment in their lifetime are also more likely to experience sexual assault.
- 1 in 6 women (17 per cent) and 1 in 25 men (4.3 per cent) have experienced at least one **sexual assault** since the age of 15.

<sup>2</sup> Refers to sexual actions without consent. This can include coercion, physical force, rape, sexual assault with implements, being forced to watch or engage in pornography, enforced prostitution, or being made to have sex with other people. (The Fourth Action Plan 2019:60).

<sup>3</sup> ABS Recorded Crime – Victims, 2020 (<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/crime-and-justice/recorded-crime-victims/latest-release#data-download>)



- Those of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds, First Nations Peoples and people with disabilities are noted as **vulnerable groups**.
- The data is particularly high among **young Australians**:
  - The ages between 15 and 19 years old are the most common age for sexual violence to occur.
  - Between 2014 and 2019, 63 per cent of the victims of sexual assault recorded by the Police were under the age of 18 years<sup>4</sup>.

Findings from ANROWS' National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey (NCAS<sup>5</sup>) reports that **young people aged 16-24 have a lower level of knowledge and understanding of sexual violence** and, can hold excusing attitudes when it comes to sexual consent. For example:

28 per cent of young people agree that “when a man is very sexually aroused, he may not even realize that the woman doesn’t want to have sex”.

28 per cent of young people agreed with the statement, “Rape results from men not being able to control their need for sex”.

25 per cent of young people agree that “a lot of times, women who say they were raped had led the man on and then had regrets” (significantly higher among young men at 32 per cent, compared to 18 per cent of young women).

24 per cent of young men agree that “women find it flattering to be persistently pursued, even if they are not interested” (significantly higher than 13 per cent recorded among young women).

18 per cent of young men agree that “many allegations of sexual assault made by women are false” (significantly higher than 10 per cent recorded among young women).

14 per cent of young people agree that a man would have been justified in a situation where “a man and a woman have just met at a party, they get on well, they go back to the woman’s home and when they get there he kisses her and tries to have sex with her. She pushes him away, but he has sex with her anyway”.

12 per cent of young people agree that “women often say no when they actually mean yes”.

13 per cent of young men agree that “women who wait weeks or months to report sexual assault are probably lying” (significantly higher than 5 per cent of young women).

<sup>4</sup> Sexual Violence - Victimization | Australian Bureau of Statistics (abs.gov.au)

<sup>5</sup> <https://20ian81kynqg38b1313eh8bf-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/2017NCAS-Youth-SubReport.pdf>



While both men and women perpetrate and experience sexual violence, the data suggests that **victims are overwhelmingly female while perpetrators remain disproportionately male**<sup>6</sup>:

- The rate of victims who experienced sexual violence by a male perpetrator is 6 times higher than victims of female perpetrators.
- 55.2 per 100,000 males compared to 1.4 per 100,000 females, represent the total recorded sexual violence offenders.
- 97 per cent of sexual violence offenders across all age groups are male.
- Young males hold the greatest proportion of any cohort committing sexual assault (102.9 per 100,000).

## **1.2 The Australian Government's commitment**

The *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022* is Australia's overarching strategy to address violence against women and children, including sexual violence. The Australian Government, in conjunction with state and territory governments, is leading the development of the *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032* (next National Plan), which will take effect from mid-2022 when the current plan ends. The next National Plan emphasises the importance of prevention to stop violence before it starts by challenging views and attitudes that condone and reinforce gender inequality and promote violence against women and children. **A key component in preventing sexual violence is supporting young people in developing positive attitudes and behaviours around consent.**

The priority placed on addressing sexual violence is evidenced by the Government's commitment in the 2021-22 Federal Budget with an allocation of \$10.1 million over four years (2021-22 to 2024-25) to develop a campaign ('the campaign') regarding consent and respectful relationships to keep young people safe from sexual violence.

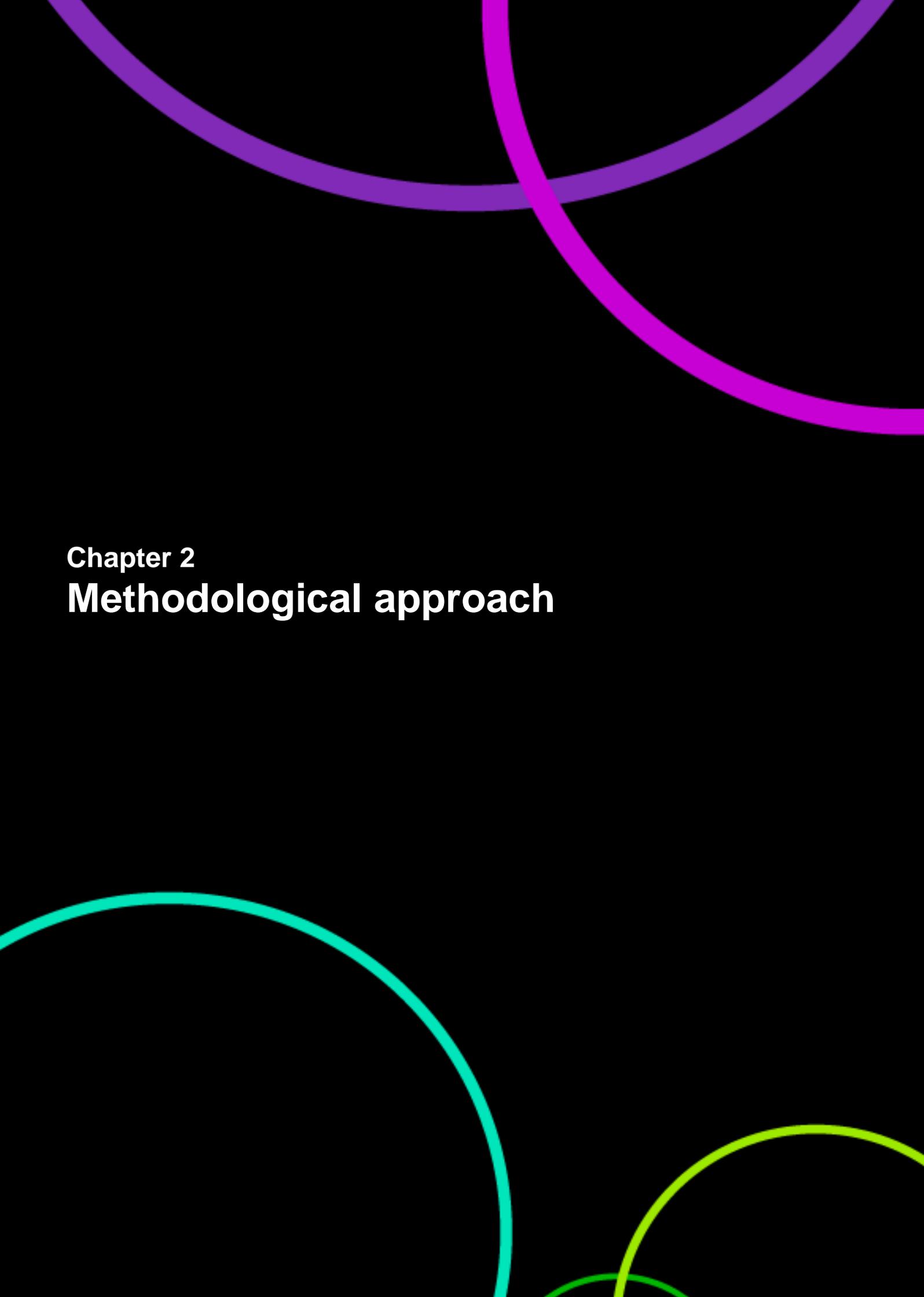
While there have been prior social marketing activities and educational resources regarding consent and respectful relationships in Australia, and there are national statistics relating to the prevalence of sexual violence and supportive attitudes, there remains an evidence gap in terms of *how* to influence this issue at a community level, and particularly how to address it via a primary prevention approach.

Primary prevention seeks to reduce the prevalence of sexual assault by intervening before it occurs. That is, positively influencing attitudes before they become entrenched and allow the behaviours to occur. This document, and the research included, was designed to inform the development of the national campaign, as part of the Australian Government's commitment.

Fundamentally, this **research seeks to provide an evidence base for comprehensively understanding the starting point for sexual consent in terms of how it can be communicated about, with the long-term goal of keeping young people safe from sexual violence by driving a shared understanding of consent and supporting positive behaviours into adulthood.**

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<sup>6</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2020, *Sexual assault in Australia*, AIHW, Australian Government.



Chapter 2

# Methodological approach



## 2. Methodological approach

### 2.1 Research methodology

A multi-modal approach was conducted, comprising both qualitative and quantitative elements.

#### 2.1.1 Qualitative Research

**Composition:** The qualitative research comprised 61 sessions, inclusive of standard focus groups, online mini groups, reflective mini groups, family sessions, and individual in-depth interviews. Sessions were conducted among males and females and included:

- parents and care-givers of young people aged 10-17 years;
- grandparents of young people aged 10-17 years;
- young people aged 10-17 years;
- setting influencers (teachers, sporting coaches, religious leaders etc);
- dedicated sessions among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse audiences; and
- dedicated sessions among First Nations peoples.

**Active consent:** All adult participants were provided a full brief on the nature of the topic during their recruitment process, and on commencement of their qualitative session and provided active consent prior to participation.

All young people (10-17 years) were referred via their parent / guardian, and both the young person and parent / guardian were provided a full brief on the nature of the topic during their recruitment process, and on commencement of their qualitative session and provided active consent prior to participation. All young people (10-14 years) participated in the session with a parent / guardian.

All participants were able to withdraw their participation at any point during the session. It is noted that no participants chose to do so.

**Timing:** All qualitative sessions were conducted between 7-16 September 2021.

**COVID-safe approaches:** The majority of qualitative sessions were conducted virtually to be compliant with public health orders across many Australian jurisdictions at the time of this research which discouraged face-to-face contact where possible. This was considered an appropriate methodological alternative and allowed people to participate from their residences. Some face-to-face sessions were conducted in Western Australia and South Australia, who did not have public health orders that prevented face-to-face research at the time this research was conducted.



**Discussion Protocols:** Discussion guides for all qualitative sessions were designed by Kantar Public and approved by the Department prior to their use.

**Participant support:** Given the topic of this research, all participants were provided contact details for a range of support services that could be accessed post participation.

**Quality assurance:** All quantitative research was conducted in accordance with ISO20252 standards.

### 2.1.2 Quantitative Research

**Composition:** A nationally representative survey (by age, gender and geography) of n=2,031 was conducted, which comprised.

Total (n=2,031)	Unweighted		Weighted	
	n=	%	n=	%
Male	936	46	1005	50
Female	1083	53	1005	50
18-34	613	30	630	31
35-54	724	36	670	33
55+	694	34	731	36
NSW/ACT	661	33	660	32
VIC	516	25	538	26
QLD	376	19	416	20
SA	189	9	203	10
WA	220	11	152	7
TAS	63	3	41	2
NT	6	0	20	1

**Quotas and weighting:** Broad non-interlocking quotas were set for gender, age, and location, to ensure a mix of residents across the country. All data was post weighted to align with ABS 2016 data (based on age, gender and location). Weighting was conducted by a RIM weighting technique.

**Margin of error:** The data has a margin of error (at the 95% confidence level) of  $\pm 2.2\%$ .

**Active consent:** All participants were provided a written brief on the nature of the topic prior to entering the survey and provided active consent prior to participation. All participants were able to withdraw their participation at any point during the survey. It is noted that termination rates were low, and in-line with industry standard.

**Timing:** The quantitative survey was conducted from 13-17 September 2021.

**Survey Instrument:** The survey instrument was designed by Kantar Public and approved by the Department prior to use. The average interview duration was 13 minutes.



**Participant support:** Given the topic of this research, all participants were provided contact details for a range of support services that could be accessed. This was available at any point during survey completion, and on final completion.

**Quality assurance:** All quantitative research was conducted in accordance with ISO20252 standards.

### 2.1.3 Reporting notes

**Qualitative direct quotes:** Direct quotes from the qualitative research have been included to reflect findings in the report where relevant. All quotes are de-identified.

*“This is a direct quote example.”*

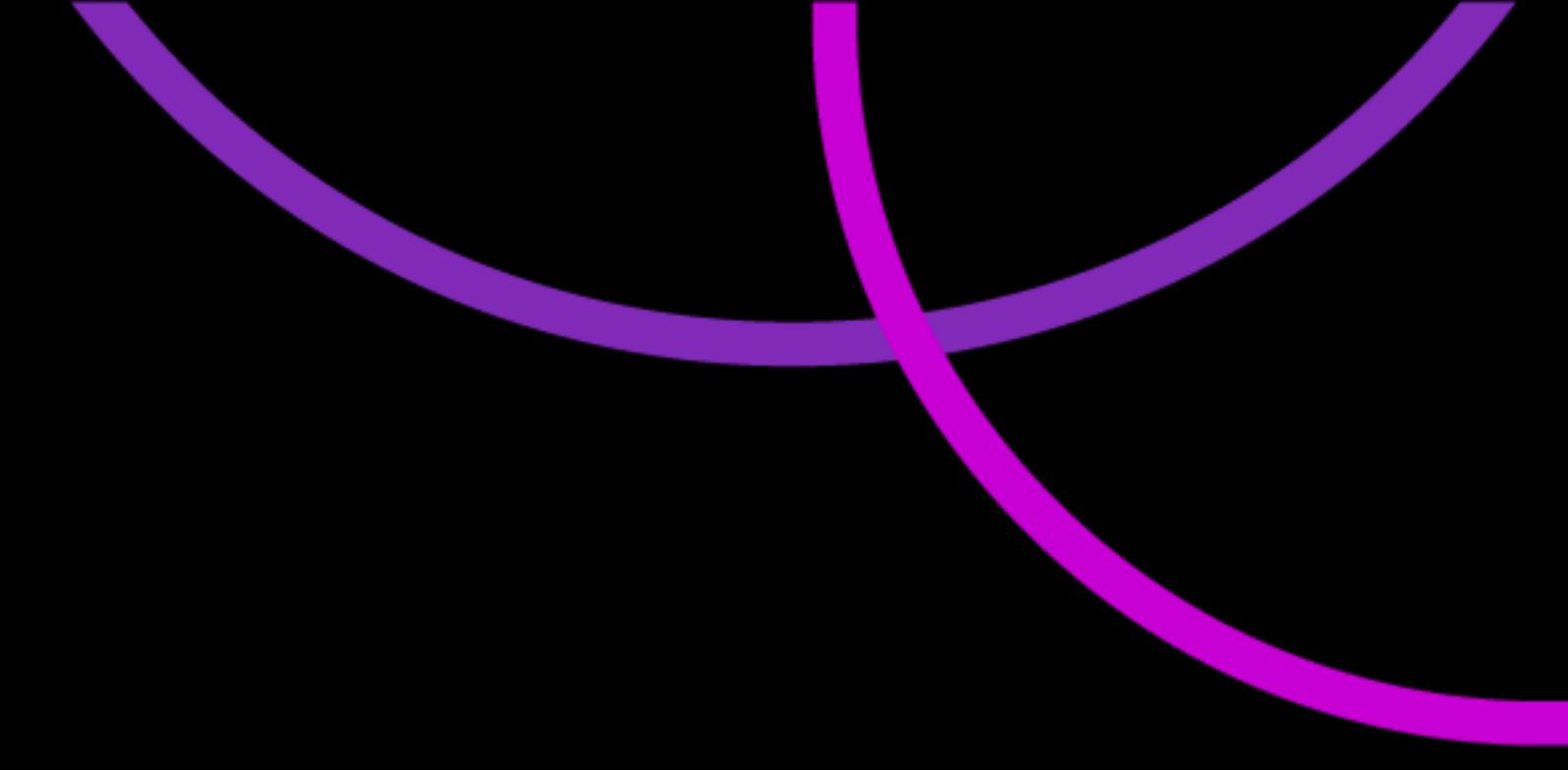
**Quantitative significance testing:** Significance testing was carried out at the 95% confidence level. This means there is a less than 5% probability that a difference occurred by chance. Where sample sizes allow (minimum n =30) significance testing was undertaken between subgroups such as male/female or within location. Significant differences are highlighted and bolded.

**Analysis and reporting:** Following the completion of qualitative and quantitative inputs, all data were analysed and triangulated to determine main themes and issues. Researchers drew on the findings from both qualitative and quantitative components to consider their implications in terms of study objectives.

**Annotating findings by gender:** Throughout this report, all references to ‘males’ and ‘females’ have been annotated as ‘some’ in recognition that not ‘all’ males and females are a homogenous group. Where a finding is referenced by gender, this is because a weight of evidence approach was applied during the analysis process, and suggested the finding was held by more than by a minority. Where a finding is more likely linked to a minority, this is directly noted.

### 2.1.4 Content warning

This report contains material that may be confronting and / or disturbing. If you need help, a reference list of support services can be found at [www.respect.gov.au/services/](http://www.respect.gov.au/services/) .

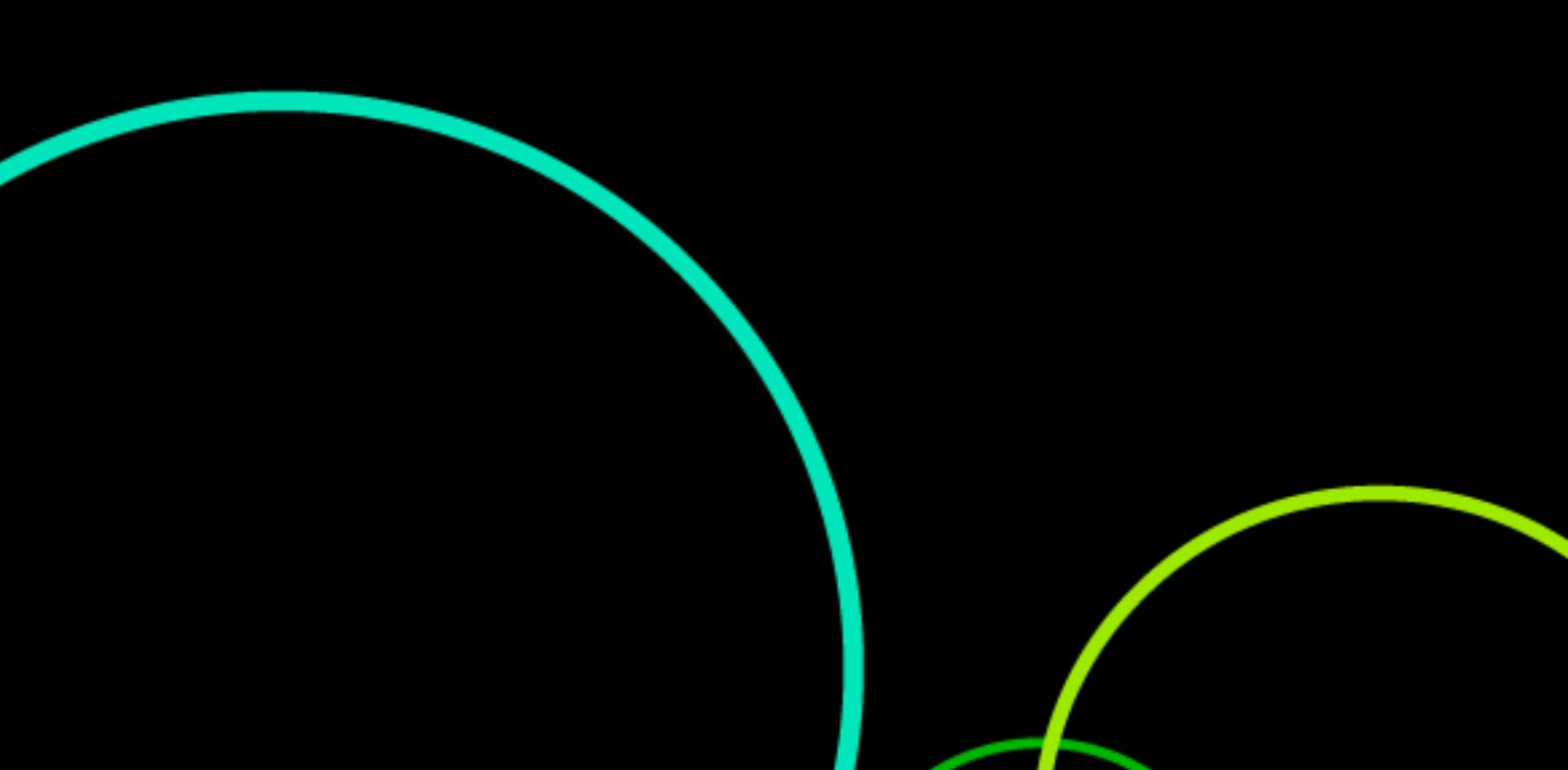


## Chapter 3

# Consent is ‘on the radar’, but is not well understood

*“There seems to be such a blurry line for what constitutes as consent  
...the conversations and the rhetoric you hear every day ...it’s like, ‘what?’.  
There’s obviously confusion generationally and in what the media is producing.”*

(participant quote)





## 3. Consent is ‘on the radar’, but is not well understood

### 3.1 Summary:

- Sexual violence and consent are not ‘new’ issues, however, over the last five years, the topics of domestic and family violence and sexual consent have increased in: their *discussion in the media*; their *leadership from Government* (with campaigns such as ‘Stop It At The Start’); as well as perceived *discussion among individuals, families and communities*.
- Influenced by this external context, **7 in 10 (70%) Australian adults (18+ years) now believe the way people broadly think and talk about sexual consent is different now compared to a few years ago**.
- However, aside from recognising things have generally changed, many feel **unable to describe these changes**, and this appears contributed to by:
  - **A definition gap ...the ‘grey area’:** While there is unanimous agreement that sexual violence and sexual assault are wrong, when it comes to sexual consent, there is a considerable ‘grey area’ before the presence of violence and assault is clear.
  - **The gender gap ...the experiential empathy:** There is broad agreement (among most males and females who participated in this research) that consent is likely to be viewed differently by gender. In part, this is because of a perceived difficulty for some males to relate to a non-consensual, or pressured, sexual experience because of a perceived reduced likelihood they would have personally experienced a similar situation.
  - **The ‘accountability gap’ ...victim blaming:** There is a lack of clarity and discomfort for with whom accountability lies for avoiding potential non-consensual situations. As a result of this, victim blaming often unconsciously and unintentionally occurs. It is noted that when victim blaming occurs, there is no intended or underlying malice.
- As a result of the above, **half of Australians (48%) are in a state of fluctuation** in relation to the topic of sexual consent. They are conflicted in their understanding of the problem, have low confidence in their ability to define it, and perceive high personal costs in challenging or changing the conversation.
- Positively, however, **this state of flux is met by equal desire for clarity and leadership on the conversation**. Indeed, three quarters (77%) consider *sexual consent a topic that is really important to them personally* and close to nine in ten (86%) agree *adults should talk to young people more about the topic of consent*.
- **Implication:** There is a **strong desire for the conversation to be led by the Australian Government** in order to firstly drive mutual understanding between adults, as well as to prompt proactive conversations between adults and young people.



### 3.2 The external context of discussions relating to sexual violence has changed

Sexual violence and consent are not 'new' issues, however, over the last five years, the topics of domestic and family violence and sexual consent have increased in: their *discussion in the media*; their *leadership from the Government* (with campaigns such as 'Stop It At The Start'); as well as perceived *discussion among individuals, families and communities*. For example:

#### 2015/2016

- In late 2015 and early 2016, there was a considerable amount of activity, and consistent messaging with regards to this topic, including:
  - cases of domestic and family violence regularly featuring as **headline news** on television, online and print mediums and editorial pieces (including editorial pieces such as, for example, Tracy Grimshaw calling for action via her role on A Current Affair);
  - **community driven movements** to honour victims, such as #putyourdressout (April 2015, onwards), a tribute to Stephanie Scott who was murdered prior to her wedding. This saw women across Australia hanging a dress outside and sharing photos on social media. Additionally, it headlined in news media.
  - **Rosie Batty as Australian of the Year** having a personal voice regarding the topic of domestic and family violence that was used with some consistency in news media.
  - **Phase 1 of "Stop It At The Start"**, which launched in April 2016.

#### 2016/2017

- **High profile cases of disrespect** towards women gained attention and were featured in news media, including:
  - a BBL cricketer issuing comments that were considered towards a female television presenter during an interview (January 2016);
  - President Trump's explanation of a filmed conversation from 2005 as "locker room banter" (October 2016);
  - the signing of an anti-abortion executive order by President Trump, which featured a photo surrounded by eight male staff (January 2017); and,
  - an instance between a male tennis player and female media interviewer that was considered disrespectful during the French Open (May 2017).
- **Conversations started regarding 'revenge porn' and 'image-based abuse' laws**, with recognition there was inconsistent legislation across Australia (November 2016).
- **Proposed amendments to Section 18C** of the Racial Discrimination Act Changes, specifically regarding the removal of words 'offend, insult, humiliate', being replaced with 'harass' and a 'reasonable person test' (March 2017).
- A small maintenance burst of "Stop It At The Start" Phase 1 campaign (March 2017).



### 2017/2018

- A five week maintenance burst of “Stop It At The Start” Phase 1 campaign (November / December).
- The **#metoo** movement gained global prominence. Media reports indicated it was tweeted more than half a million times and used by 4.7 million people in 12 million posts in the first 24 hours following a tweet from Alyssa Milano (October 15, 2017). A 2018 PEW review of the movement stated the hashtag was used more than 19 million times on Twitter since the initial tweet. The #metoo movement was considered high profile globally and included a number of cases in Australia.
- **Phase 2 of “Stop It At The Start”** launched in October, running through November 2018.

### 2018/2019

- Several **high-profile cases of violence against women** received media coverage, including that of: murder of Melbourne comedian Eurydice Dixon (June 2018); Sydney-based video-gamer accidentally live-streams assault of his partner while playing video game (December 2018); murder of Israeli student Aiiia Maasarwe (January 2019).
- **Inquiry of family court system** relating to domestic violence claims in custody battles announced (September 2019).
- Media attention to incident involving **Melbourne private boys school students and a sexist chant** sung on public transport and in public locations that were captured on video, discussed in news media, and shared across social media (October 2019).

### 2020/2021

- The **launch of Phase 3 of ‘Stop It At The Start’**.
- The **personal and prominent voices of Australian survivors of sexual abuse** and violence, including former political adviser Brittany Higgins and 2021 Australian of the Year Grace Tame which stimulated new conversations, new movements (such as #LetHerSpeak, and petitions for sexual consent education in private schools), national rallies demanding change and an end to gendered violence, and also legislative change (such as the allowance of sexual assault survivors to use their names in the media).
- A review of the Australian Parliament’s culture following the **disclosure of historical rape allegations** within the Australian Parliament.
- **Internationally high profile trials and convictions of perpetrators** of sexual violence and abuse such as R Kelly in the United States of America, and Wayne Couzens in the United Kingdom.



### 3.3 Amid this shifting external context, there is perceived change in the *internal* narrative among many Australians

*“If movements like that didn’t exist, there would be next to no conversation about it all  
...unless you knew someone personally or had happened to you  
...there would be no conversation whatsoever”*

Amid this change in external context, it is not surprising that **7 in 10 Australian adults (18+ years) believe the way people broadly think and talk about sexual consent is different now compared to a few years ago**. Indeed, while sexual consent has not been a specific component of a coordinated Government communications strategy to date, as shown in the Figure below, there are currently equal proportions who believe this issue is perceived differently, as there are for domestic violence.

Figure: Perceived changes in narrative in 2021	Disrespect and violence against women	Sexual consent
<b>Q: The way people think about &lt;&lt;domestic violence / sexual consent&gt;&gt; is different now compared to a few years ago (6-10/10 agreement)</b>	n=2,031 %	n=2,031 %
<b>All respondents</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>70</b>
Males (n=936)	68	69
Females (n=1,083)	66	70
18-34 male (n=174)	68	74
35-54 male (n=306)	74	70
55+ male (n=456)	64	67
18-34 female (n=432)	64	67
35-54 female (n=414)	66	75
55+ female (n=237)	69	69
Setting influencer (n=253)	80	81
Close influencer (n=615)	73	74

\* Significantly different relative to other sub-groups at 95% confidence interval



### 3.4 While the perceived conversation has changed, the differences in the conversation are not necessarily clear

While the majority perceive changes in the way people think and talk about the issue of sexual consent, the nature of these differences are, however, unclear. When asked ‘what’ these differences were, only one general comment emerged at greater frequency than 10% - that ‘*sexual consent is talked about more / discussed more openly*’ (13% of all respondents, 34% among those who feel the conversation is different). Fundamentally, even those who perceive some difference reflect on the ‘frame of the problem’ rather than indicating that the problem has ‘moved forwards or changed’. That is, **while the conversation of sexual consent is now more likely to be on people’s ‘radars’, it has not necessarily increased in internalisation of the concept, nor in mutual understanding.**

The qualitative evidence suggests **three potential contributors** to this (each of which are discussed in further detail throughout this report):

1. **The ‘definition’ gap ...the ‘grey area’:** While there is unanimous agreement among males and females (regardless of age) that sexual violence and sexual assault are wrong, when it comes to sexual consent, there is a perceived ‘grey area’ before the presence of violence and assault is clear. This ‘grey area’ is considered difficult to describe, and variable dependent on the individual. As a concept that is **difficult to define within one’s own context, it is then unavoidable that it becomes even more difficult to define to others – particularly, to young people.**

*“There seems to be such a **blurry line** for what constitutes as consent ...the conversations and the rhetoric you hear every day ...it’s like, ‘what?’. There’s obviously confusion generationally and in what the media is producing.”*

*“It’s **confusing** ...it’s one person’s view versus another person’s view ...we can’t read each other’s minds ...you could be showing other actions, other words ...the other person could be hearing them differently to the way you’re speaking.”*

2. **The ‘gender’ gap ...the ‘experiential empathy’:** The majority of males and females appear to agree the concept of consent is likely to be viewed differently by gender. A consistent reason for this (described by both males and females) related to the perceived difficulty for some males to relate to a non-consensual or pressured sexual experience. This was because of a perceived reduced likelihood they would have personally experienced a similar situation. It is noted that this perceived reduced likelihood is supported by national statistics (the AIHW Personal Safety Survey) which indicate 1 in 5 women (17%, or 1.6 million) and 1 in 25 men (4.3% or 385,000) have experienced at least 1 sexual assault since the age of 15 years<sup>7</sup>.

*“...from a woman’s point of view when someone is trying to push them into something ...women deal with it constantly, men hardly ever do.*

*They think they know what it’s about, but **they’ve never had to experience what it’s like with someone being pushy.**”*

3. **The ‘accountability gap’ ...‘victim blaming’:** When it comes to sexual consent, there appears a discomfort, but lack of clarity for with whom accountability lies for avoiding potential non-consensual sexual situations. As a result of this, victim blaming often unconsciously, and unintentionally, occurs among males and females – even while all agree non-consensual

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/0375553f-0395-46cc-9574-d54c74fa601a/aihw-fdv-5.pdf.aspx?inline=true>



situations are wrong. It is noted that when victim blaming occurs, there is no intended or underlying malice present.

*“If a girl goes out at night and gets drunk ...unfortunately, **she becomes a target** ...**you have to think about the situation you put yourself in to start with.**”*

*“Girls should be able to go out and wear what they want ...**but**, if you’re going out wearing a bikini top into a bar ...**you are asking for trouble, aren’t you? It’s just how it is.** Women are sending mixed signals.”*

*“...**whatever women do these days, it’s so much scrutinised** ...if you go to a pub and there’s five guys having a chat about politics, nobody gives a damn ...**but** if you see a girl in a short skirt, people start having conversations – what is this girl up to? She gets highly scrutinised. **We’re living in a society that still has this stigma ...we’re living in a divided society.**”*

### 3.5 Many people, as a result of these differences, remain in a state of ‘flux’, and this creates a strong appetite for clarity and leadership

*“If we are not thinking the same way, then **we should be** ...it’s a **big concern** as a society if we don’t understand each other’s feelings ...especially in the case of sexual behaviour and sexual advances.”*

When segmented, **half of Australians (48%) are in a state of fluctuation in relation to the topic of sexual consent**, and this is consistent by age and gender. In this research, Fluctuators experience uncertainty, perceived conflict, and discomfort on the topic. And, as a result, they tend to actively avoid involvement – both internally (‘thinking’ about the topic and their own behaviour) as well as externally (‘talking’ about it with others, including young people). This is because they:

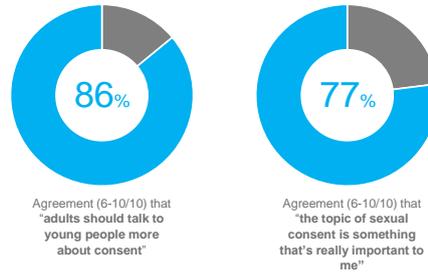
- are **conflicted in their understanding** of the problem of consent, and the potential solutions (discussed further in Section 4).
- have **low confidence in their ability to define** consent – for themselves, and for others (discussed further in Section 5).
- perceive **high personal costs of challenging or changing** the conversation relating to consent (discussed further in Section 6).

Positively, the noted **state of flux** associated with the concept of sexual consent, is met by **equal desire for clarity and leadership on the conversation**, with:

- As shown overleaf, three quarters (77%) considering “**sexual consent a topic that is really important to them**” personally.
- Close to nine in ten (86%) agreeing “**adults should talk to young people more about the topic of consent**”.



Figure: Perceived importance of the topic, and of talking about it  
Base: n=2,031



As shown in the data below:

- Males and females of all ages agree that *adults should talk to young people about sexual consent*.
- However, females are significantly more likely than males to consider the topic of *sexual consent as really important to them* (72% males vs. 82% females).
- This difference among males is predominantly driven by a lower likelihood of perceived importance among males 55+ years (68%).

Figure: Importance of the topic	Adults should talk to young people about consent	The topic of sexual consent is really important to me
<b>Q: Adults should talk to young people more about sexual consent (6-10/10 agreement)</b>	n=2031	n=2031
<b>Q: When you think about all the things that matter to you, where do you place the issue of sexual consent (6-10/10 agreement – ‘it’s something that’s really important to me’)</b>	%	%
<b>All respondents</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>77</b>
Males (n=936)	83	72
Females (n=1083)	88	82*
18-34 male (n=174)	81	79*
35-54 male (n=306)	83	75*
55+ male (n=456)	83	68
18-34 female (n=432)	88	82
35-54 female (n=414)	89	83
55+ female (n=237)	89	78
Setting influencer (n=253)	92	85
Close influencer (n=615)	86	79

\* Significantly different relative to other sub-groups at 95% confidence interval (significance testing is performed within column data, not across the statements/columns)



Despite the noted difference in gender, there is a **consistently strong desire for the conversation to be sparked and led** in order to create a resolution to the problem, and drive individual and societal change. There is a strong desire for the Australian Government to provide both stimulus and resources to prompt:

- **Firstly, mutual understanding** of the topic of sexual consent by stimulating conversations **between adults.**
- **Secondly**, once a mutual understanding among adults is achieved, **conversations between adult influencers and young people.**

*“I think **we should have these types of conversations more often** ...with our partners and our children. The more we talk about it and we hear about what’s acceptable and not to our societies ...the behaviour change will become normalised.*

*At the moment, you’re dealing with outliers that are coming through because somebody has had the courage to stand up ...the more we talk about it the more it will be in the open.”*

*“If the **Government** could come up with some way of promoting these conversations between parents and children, it **would be very beneficial.**”*

*“[after discussing in the research] I spoke to my friend of 25 years who I speak to a couple of times a week ...it’s not a conversation we’ve ever had before ...I think it’s important that we talk about it in a **bigger circle than just our homes.**”*

*“To me ...**being encouraged to talk to other adults like this** [after discussing in the research] **is a little bit like practice** ...if you think about it here, you get more comfortable about it ...you’re more in the zone ...the more you hear it better.”*

*“After this session, I had a conversation with my son (14 years old) about it ...we literally talked all through dinner ...I **had no idea how much they were thinking about this stuff already** ...it was such a great conversation, I wish I’d known and had it earlier and I will definitely keep talking about it now.”*

### 3.6 Implication

The topic of sexual consent is already on the radar of Australian adults – and there is a desire to be better equipped in having conversations with young people. However, to have meaningful conversations, the differences in how consent is understood, perceived and responded to by adults will need to be resolved. There is a strong desire for the Australian Government to play a role in this regard.

## Chapter 4

# Consent is considered a ‘problem’, for which it is difficult to find a ‘solution’

*“This whole argument about consent ...it takes away from human nature ...it doesn’t make sense ...it’s not practical, it’s not feasible ...if you have a bunch of guys asking a question on a date like ‘can I touch you / take your bra off / take your pants off’ ...it’s exhausting – I wouldn’t want to do it, I’d rather watch a movie.”*

(participant quote)



## 4. Consent is considered a ‘problem’, for which it is difficult to find a ‘solution’

### 4.1 Summary:

- Through this research, conversations around consent largely remained centred around the ‘problem’ of consent, where **people readily identify issues and challenges on the topic, but are less able to identify a solution or mutually understood pathway forwards.**
- In part, this is driven from a perceived adaptation or change in definition in recent years, coupled with a **lack of what this ‘new’ definition entails** and how it should translate into the way people should now interact and behave.
- While the topic of consent remains in the position of being considered a ‘problem’, there is an **avoidance of judgement** for what may be considered ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ and, **one third (32%) believe *the issue of consent has been blown out of proportion.***
- While there is widespread agreement that sexual violence and assault are wrong, the complexities of navigating the problem result in **four core heuristics which impede the likelihood to influence, and to be influenced.** These relate to:
  - **A deflection of responsibility and blame towards females** for non-consensual situations (whether the provision of consent was clear, rather than whether a request or mutual decision was reached).
  - **Empathy with male positions** (a perception that female intent can be difficult to understand, that it can be a normal part of learning or a normal expression of affection).
  - **Resultant disconnection from female positions** (a perception that females can dramatize situations, change their minds, and not necessarily experience any harm from non-consensual activity).
  - **Contextual discounts** (a perception that alcohol and setting can reduce personal responsibility for non-consensual acts).
- There are also other factors which seek to discount judgement of non-consensual behaviour which relate to the presence of mental health disabilities or conditions, sexual preferences, and the impact of movies and pornography.
- **Implication:** As something that is considered a ‘problem’ that holds no obvious resolution at an individual level, leadership (in awareness and education) is necessary to encourage a national conversation (between adults, as well as between adults and young people) that drives mutual understanding of the topic.



## 4.2 While consent is agreed as a ‘problem’ that exists, there are few consistently identifiable ‘solutions’

As previously noted, the vast majority of the target audiences agree that sexual consent has elevated on the radar of Australian adults and young people over the years and, is a problem that needs to be addressed. However, conversations remain largely centred around the problem of consent, whereby people readily identify issues and challenges of the topic but, are less able to identify a solution or mutually understood pathway forward.

The problems identified start with a **perceived adaptation or change in definition** in recent years, but a **lack of understanding on what this ‘new’ definition entails and how it should translate to the way people should now interact and behave with each other.**

*“It used to be ‘its given unless someone says something’ ...but, we’ve moved away from that. We’re in a world where you have to hear ‘yes’ ...I don’t think it’s practical ...talking about ‘yes’ will cause more harm.”*

*“This whole argument about consent ...it **takes away from human nature** ...it **doesn’t make sense** ...it’s **not practical, it’s not feasible** ...if you have a bunch of guys asking a question on a date like ‘can I touch you / take your bra off / take your pants off’ ...it’s **exhausting** – I wouldn’t want to do it, I’d rather watch a movie.”*

## 4.3 The absence of a perceived solution risks active avoidance of judgement

When the topic of consent remains in the position of being identified as a ‘problem’, many **avoid judgement of what is considered ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ because of the perceived lack of solution** (or, at least consistency of solution) that is defined and agreed from which to form this basis.

When this occurs, many are **willing to admit there could be something wrong but, are reluctant to firmly uphold any position.** Resultant, scenarios of sexual consent can be labelled as relatively normal and sometimes **benign learning experiences for young people**, and risk being **dismissed based on a lack of understanding of context** – that is, ‘situations’ and ‘complexity’ can be blamed rather than ‘behaviours’. For example (when provided a hypothetical description of a non-consensual physical act between a young male and young female):

*“...there is a **bit of an alarm** going off, but you still need to get the real story ...the whole story.”*

*“...could be **moderately wrong** ...but a **little bit hard to tell** on the basis of the information ...can’t be black and white about it ...feels more along the lines of **a potential hiccup**.”*

*“...I **don’t think the boy has done anything wrong** by trying to figure it out...”*

*“...he [adult influencer] **struggles to make a judgement call** on what to do because he **doesn’t know the context**...”*

Aligned with this, **one third (32%) of the target audiences currently believe the issue of consent has been blown out of proportion.** As shown in the data below, this belief is particularly strong among:

- **males** across all age cohorts comparative to the same age cohorts among females);



- **18-54 year old males** when compared to males 55+ years;
- **18-54 year old females** when compared to females 55+ years.

<b>Figure: Beliefs on sexual consent as a topic/issue</b>	
<b>Q: The issue of consent has been blown out of proportion (6-10/10 agreement)</b>	n=2,031
	%
<b>All respondents</b>	<b>32</b>
Males (n=936)	37*
Females (n=1083)	27
18-34 male (n=174)	53*
35-54 male (n=306)	47*
55+ male (n=456)	25
18-34 female (n=432)	35*
35-54 female (n=414)	24*
55+ female (n=237)	17
Setting influencer (n=253)	49
Close influencer (n=615)	39

\* Significantly different relative to other sub-groups at 95% confidence interval

#### 4.4 To facilitate avoidance in judging situations, a range of automatic default heuristics are evident

While there is widespread agreement that sexual violence and assault are wrong, the complexities of navigating ‘new’ definitions and contexts surrounding consent result in a range of automatic defences (heuristics) that impede our likelihood to influence young people. These heuristics are consistent between males and females (young and adult), influencers, CALD and First Nations peoples. They are related to the automation of:

- deflection of responsibility and blame towards females;**
- empathy with male positions;**
- disconnection from female positions; and,**
- contextual discounts.**

##### A. Deflection of responsibility towards females

Because the definition of sexual consent is currently considered one that is lacking clarity and ‘not agreed’, there is a **common automatic response to defer responsibility in situations of non-consensual activity away from males and towards females**. There are several rationales for this deflection, which relate to:

- a perceived ‘**lack of clarity**’ on the part of the female in communicating consent.



*“...might wonder how clear the girl was ...without blaming her just wonder whether the girl had given clear messages in the first place.”*

- the degree to which **consent was forcefully articulated by the female.**

*“...she needs to learn how to speak up ...it’s got to be emphatic.”*

- the extent to which there were **female signals that could have been misread.**

*“...there may have been **signals he misread** ...he **didn’t do it** [non-consensual act] **intentionally.**”*

When this occurs, it results in an absolution of needing to challenge or correct the non-consensual behaviour of the initiator, and instead focus on the perceived absence of behaviour from the female recipient. In doing so, influencers unintentionally minimise their perceived necessity to participate in a solution.

### **B. Empathy with the male position**

In addition to deflection of responsibility and blame, there is **evidence of empathy with the male** – rather than with the female – in situations involving sexual consent. This empathy is present among males and females, and is in relation to:

- a **perceived difficulty understanding female intent.**

*“...if she’s kissing me, I’m thinking something more ...why do women kiss if they don’t intend on following through?”*

- potentially harmful non-consensual behaviours from young males being considered a **normal part of learning.**

*“...every young boy does stupid things in trying to figure out how to behave in the world.”*

- the extent to which non-consensual behaviours are considered a **normal expression of affection.**

*“...it could just be that his son likes the girl and is just trying to attract her attention [by giving her a non-consensual kiss].”*

### **C. Disconnection of empathy for the female position**

Associated with empathy for the male position in non-consensual scenarios, there can be a **corresponding low presence of empathy with the female position as a result.** When this occurs, it is in relation to perceptions that:

- **females can over-react or dramatize situations.** This perception is articulated by adults, and also often felt by younger females, which contributes to a sense of avoidance of female disclosure to discuss the topic with each other and with adult influencers.

*“...they’ll think she’s [young person] **just being dramatic.**”*

*“...it’s **scary to report** ...it is her word against his ...it is hard to be believed, **she could get backlash.**”*

- ‘**changes in mind**’ on behalf of the female which can lead to non-consensual situations **can be misconstrued as purposeful decisions by females, and therefore, not necessarily warranting consideration for empathy.**



*“...the girl could have just changed her mind  
...women change their mind based on revenge.”*

*“...sometimes young people know what they want to say in their head, but they’re not confident  
to get it out ...they feel like they have to do it because they can’t get out of the situation  
...sometimes it’s just too late.”*

- non-consensual acts do not necessarily require empathy or intervention **unless the experience of harm to the female is obvious.**

*“...it depends on how she reacts ...is she visibly upset?”*

#### D. Contextual discounts

In addition to the heuristics above, **adults sometimes apply a contextual lens to scenarios and situations of consent, which more frequently present reasons ‘not’ to judge or change behaviour rather than reasons ‘to’ influence.** When this occurs, it is most commonly associated with:

- the **setting itself**, whereby some settings such as nightclubs and bars are considered less relevant in terms of non-consensual behaviour, because the premise of simply ‘being’ in that environment or setting indicates a preparedness or acceptance for potential non-consensual activity to occur.

*“...if you’re somewhere where things are promiscuous, like a nightclub,  
it’s [the rules around consent] different  
...people who go there are seeking that kind of excitement.”*

*“...girls should be able to go out and wear what they want ...bit if you’re going out wearing a bikini top into a bar ...you are asking for trouble, aren’t you? It’s just how it is. Especially if you’re somewhere people are drinking, there’s music going, it all adds to that.  
Women are sending mixed signals.”*

- the **consumption of alcohol by the male**, which minimises the perception of intentional wrong-doing and, in turn, places accountability on ‘alcohol’ as opposed to the ‘behaviour’.

*“...if he wasn’t drunk at all, it’s possibly wrong ...he could have just been drunk and not in control of himself, so it’s less wrong.”*

- the **consumption of alcohol by both the male and female**, which places equal accountability on the potentially impeded judgement of both the male and female, as opposed to questioning any non-consensual behaviour.

*“...if we’re both drunk, are you saying we’ve raped each other?”*

*“...throw in alcohol, drugs ...it all changes again  
...those rules become even more complex.”*

#### 4.5 In addition to heuristics, there is some extrapolation of potential circumstantial reasons in order to deflect the topic

For some adults, once having progressed through the initial wall of heuristics / automatic defences, there are additional reasons ‘not’ to pass judgement or actively engage with the topic of sexual



consent. These 'other reasons' are an extrapolation of the range of potentially minority circumstances and include:

- **The presence of mental health conditions / disability:** A minority of adults are reluctant to attribute responsibility or blame on the basis there are mental health disabilities and conditions which could impair an individual's ability to understand the concept of consent. When this occurs, the empathy is grounded towards the male participant, and the position of the female is discounted.

*"...there could be an underlying condition with the child, he could actually have a **special needs disability**."*

*"...what if he has autism or something like that ...**he might just not know that it's not ok**."*

- **Legitimising through sexual preferences where 'no' can mean 'yes':** A minority of adults rationalise a hypothetical situation of non-consensual acts by linking it to the sexual preferences of both parties (for example, BDSM), where it is believed a 'no' can mean 'yes'. Resultant, the scenario in question is discounted from any wrong-doing.

*"...if you have a couple with **BDSM**, they have set up a fantasy arrangement, then '**no**' can mean '**yes**'."*

- **Attribution of blame to movies and pornography:** A minority of adults remove responsibility of actions from the individual and, place it on external media such as movies and pornography. When this occurs, the behaviour is discounted and blame is externally attributed.

*"...could have been **acting out from a movie** ...they're learning adult actions and don't understand the consequences of them."*

#### 4.6 There is some catastrophisation of the topic of consent by focussing on attributing it to sexual assault

There appears some concern among a minority of adults that conversations relating to sexual consent are over exaggerated because of the low prevalence of sexual assault convictions, and that discussions of consent inflate the issue to a population-level, when it should only be considered an issue for a minority. When this occurs, there is a **concern that conversations around consent risk fuelling a problem, being detrimental to males, rather than driving a solution**. For example:

*"...what concerns me is the fact that the percentage of rapists in this country would be less than 0.001% of the population, and yet **from what we hear and the way it is portrayed in the media, genetically from birth, anyone who ends up a male is an evil predator waiting to pounce** ...I'm concerned that so much of what we see ...the protest movements against males, purely for the fact that they're male and capable of being a rapist."*



## **4.7 Implication**

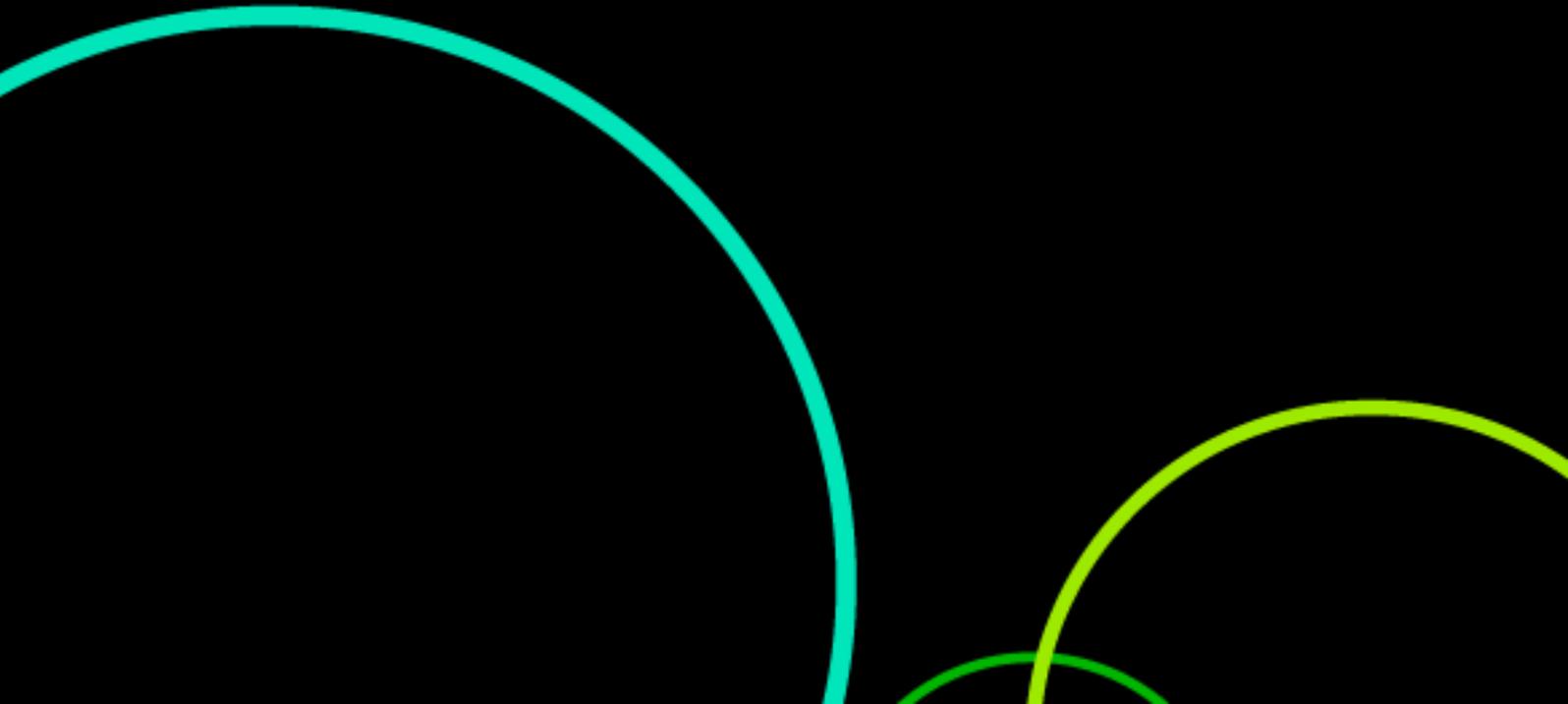
The topic of consent is often perceived as a problem that is difficult to resolve, with no easily derived solutions, which can result in active avoidance of engaging in the topic. Encouraging adults to think and talk about it consent with each other is a first step in generating greater comfort that there is a potential 'solution', and way forwards that can be mutually agreed and shared with young people.



## Chapter 5

# Confusion about what consent *is* creates tension

*“It needs to be clear-cut, but it’s not always because  
there is no universal template or format of what it looks or sounds like.”*  
(participant quote)





## 5. Confusion about what consent *is* creates tension

### 5.1 Summary:

- While there is universal agreement that sex without consent is wrong, many perceive a **range of contextual and other factors that make the ‘real world’ situation much harder to navigate** for themselves, and even more so, to communicate with young people.
- Around **half (47%) agree that *sexual consent has become a minefield for men, making it impossible to know what to do***, and this is higher among males (57%) compared to females (37%).
- There are questions on consent where males and females appear somewhat divided in their assumptions, including:
  - **Whether consent can be withdrawn**, and if there are some scenarios where this is either not appropriate, or difficult to do in practice.
  - **Whether it is easy to ‘say no’**, whereby some males perceive this an easy task but some females by comparison consider this difficult and potentially loaded with negative consequences.
  - Whether an **absence of ‘yes’ implies a lack of consent**.
  - Whether **uninvited or non-consensual physical attention** is in the realm of consent.
  - Whether **asking for consent** spoils the mood.
- ***Implication:*** Without mutual understanding between adults, these points of confusion pose a difficult task for adults to have conversations with young people about consent. There is benefit from resolving these points of confusion through encouraging constructive conversations between adults.



## 5.2 Consent is difficult to define ...even for oneself

Among Australian adults, there is universal agreement that sex without consent is wrong. However, in practice, most Australians perceive a range contextual and other factors that make that ‘real world’ situation much harder to navigate. It is felt that it is easy to get sexual consent wrong, often in that very large ‘grey area’ that stops short of being outright rape or sexual assault, but which can nonetheless still be an unpleasant, uncomfortable or unwanted situation for one of the parties.

Indeed, when asked to define sexual consent, the overarching element of consistency relates to an element of **confusion**:

*“My brother would say **it’s confusing**...whereas the girls would say it’s obvious.”*

*“There’s **always the chance of confusion**...maybe it’s not clear cut, you’re not ticking the box at the bottom of a form.”*

*“I’d really have to think about this properly, because **I’ve never had to think of a definition**.  
It’s a hard one.”*

*“It is **confusing** ...it’s one person’s views versus another’s  
...we cannot read each other’s minds.”*

*“It’s about agreeing to something ...but **it’s confusing**  
...because sometimes you feel the pressure.”*

*“It needs to be clear-cut, but it’s not always because  
**there is no universal template or format of what it looks or sounds like.**”*

## 5.3 There is a perception that it has become a navigational ‘minefield’

The extent of confusion is evident when asked *whether sexual consent has become a minefield for men, making it impossible to know what to do*:

- Half of adults 18+ agree.
- Three in five males aged 18-34 (62%) and 35-54 (57%) agree – being significantly more likely than their female counterparts to agree.

*“...It’s very **easy to make a mistake** ...the signs are very **subtle** ...there’s **no black and white contract** ...it’s a **very fine line** ...it’s a very **tough area to navigate.**”*

Figure: Beliefs on sexual consent as a topic/issue	
Q: The issue of consent has been blown out of proportion (6-10/10 agreement)	n=2031
	%
All respondents	47
Males (n=936)	57*
Females (n=1083)	37
18-34 male (n=174)	62



35-54 male (n=306)	57
55+ male (n=456)	56
18-34 female (n=432)	36
35-54 female (n=414)	36
55+ female (n=237)	40
Setting influencer (n=253)	58
Close influencer (n=615)	53

\* Significantly different relative to other sub-groups at 95% confidence interval

#### 5.4 There are questions on the ‘definition’ that divide rather than unite

While there is **unanimous agreement that consent should be mutual**, there are several critical elements of the definition that divide adults rather than unite:

- **Whether consent can be withdrawn:** For some, there is a perception of a potential ‘point of no return’ where there are expectations for consensual activity. While both males and females identify this, the perception is less likely to be held by females who are more likely to believe that in theory, consent can be withdrawn at any time. However, in reality, there is a reluctance to follow through with a withdrawal of consent, driven by an expectation of potentially negative repercussions from changing one’s mind.

*“...you were both on the same page or you thought you were – and then, something happened and there’s some backpedalling happening ...a clear indication that ‘we’re not on the same page’ ...but it’s kinda gone past the point of no return.” (male)*

**...compared with ...**

*“To avoid all that ...and avoid the other person getting angry, losing friends ...it’s often easier to do what is expected.” (female)*

- **The ease of saying ‘no’:** For some males, there is a perception that it should be easy to not provide consent, and to say ‘no’. However, this is not necessarily the reality for many females.

*“...If you want to say no ...that person you are dealing with should be able to stop ...if it comes to the point, you can still scream or still run.” (male)*

**...compared with ...**

*“The fear of what might happen next is greater than the fear of saying ‘no’.” (female)*

- **The absence of ‘yes’:** For some males, there is a perception that the absence of ‘yes’ is not a lack of consent. However, this definition is not necessarily the case for many females who perceive multiple ways that an absence of consent can be present.

*“...If they haven’t actually said ‘no’, or they’re just acting unsure ...that just means to keep trying, it’s kinda just a barrier you need to push through, unless they really say ‘no’.” (male)*

**...compared with ...**



*“There are lots of different signs that you’re ok or not ok with it  
...it’s not just about saying ‘yes’ or ‘no’.” (female)*

- **‘Uninvited attention’ is not about consent:** The topic of uninvited physical attention is perceived differently to consent by some. While some males accept uninvited (or, non-consensual) physical attention from females as something that may be infrequently occurring, but harmless, many females consider non-consensual physical attention unwanted and offensive (regardless of its frequency).

*[if pinched on the bottom by a stranger of opposite gender]  
“...Guys would **love it** ...not offended at all, just some casual fun. Maybe it’s because guy’s bodies haven’t been objectified for decades, so we just don’t understand.” (male)*

**...compared with ...**

*“I’d feel **disgusted** ...but, it takes courage to do something next  
...there can be repercussions or consequences.” (female)*

- **Asking for consent spoils the mood:** In terms of when consent should be raised, two in five males (37%) agree they ‘*would have difficulty asking for consent because it would spoil the mood*’, which is significantly higher compared to females (25%).

*“It’s just not basic instinct ...a lot of this stuff is **primal** and  
you’re not going to be thinking rationally at this time ...I’ve never once had someone say ‘let’s have sex, I agree’ ...it would **ruin the mood**.” (male)*

**...compared with ...**

*“When you do something and you don’t really want to, or you’re not into it, it doesn’t feel good at all  
...it’s **much better to have asked and want to do it**, otherwise you’re just doing it because you’re afraid, or they’ve pressured you so you give in.” (female)*

As a result, males and females find themselves on different pages, both in terms of attitudes, mindsets and lived experience. While there is undoubtedly feelings of pressure to obtain consent and concern about getting it right, the realisation that that females do not necessarily hold the same definitions was alarming for some males.

*“I’m finding the whole topic rather confronting...most confronting was regarding the girl that would give in [and have sex] just because it was the easy way out  
...that absolutely floored me, I’m quite shocked.” (male)*

## 5.5 Implication

The confusion that is associated with the topic of sexual consent is a tension that will benefit from being resolved. In particular, this relates to the tension between adults and the definitions they hold for themselves – rather than the definitions they share with young people. There is potential value in adult influencers conversing with each other to generate a mutual understanding of each other’s position.

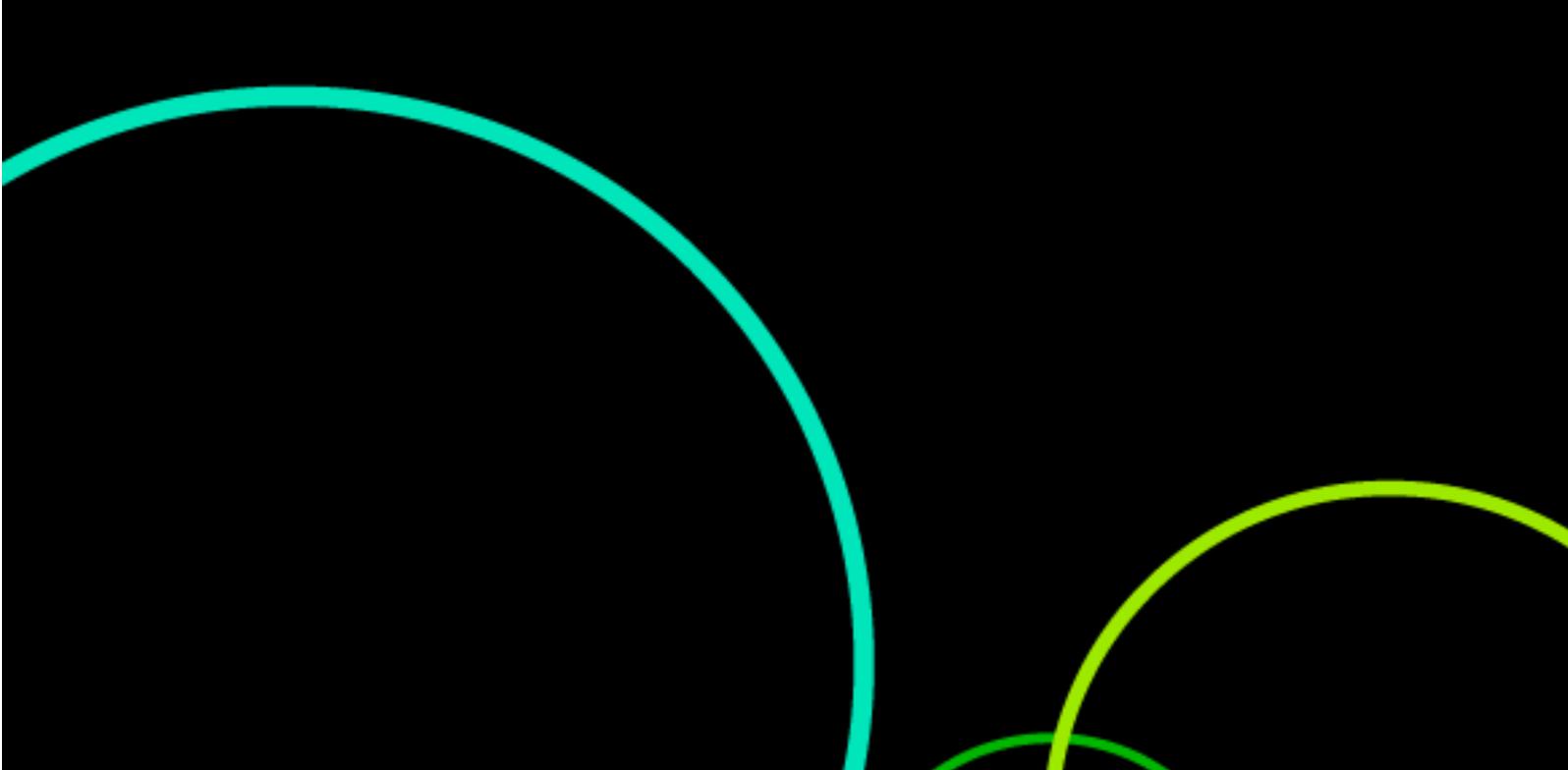


## Chapter 6

# The perceived costs of joining the conversation can feel enormous

*“Things felt a lot easier when I didn't have to think about all this stuff. The more I hear and learn about the topic of consent, the more I worry about how to engage with my kids on this...”*

(participant quote)





## 6. The perceived costs of joining the conversation can feel enormous

### 6.1 Summary:

- There is **widespread recognition that sexual consent needs to be addressed** as a part of the development of young Australians to prevent future problems. However, adults appear aware that they are **not necessarily on the same page**, and this impedes their ability to have conversations with each other and, with young people.
- While there is understanding of the topic of consent more broadly, **sexual consent is considered subjective, based on personal belief systems and easy to misinterpret.**
- When thinking about having conversations with young people, because of the confusion and low internalisation of the concept of sexual consent, there are **high perceived costs** for adults relating to:
  - **making the situation worse** for young people and/or themselves if they ‘get the conversation wrong’.
  - having the conversation **too early, or too late** – understanding when it is the best time to talk about sexual consent.
  - **feeling exposed** by not being able to navigate the conversation with young people and, being presented with potentially unanswerable questions.
  - knowing whether consent should be **‘taught’ or ‘learned’**.
- Overarching all of this is a consistent sentiment that there is an **absence of generational role modelling** on conversation relating to sexual consent, in part because the environment and context around consent has changed. It is considered a **‘new’ conversation**, for which they **have few foundational experiences**.
- **Implication:** The presence of ‘more questions than answers’ risks avoidance of conversations with other adults, and with young people. Conversations between adults, to drive a mutual understanding, will generate higher self-efficacy to communicate with young people.



## 6.2 There are perceived costs of the conversation, but also of lack of conversation

The perceived costs of getting involved in conversations about consent is overlaid by the fact that parents and influencers already feel **significant confusion and a level of division regarding how consent is defined both for ourselves and others**. This, in turn, acts as a rational barrier to starting a conversation, particularly with children and young people. As cited previously, nearly half the community are experiencing a fluctuating state (48%) – aware of the problem, concerned about the consequences, but not entirely sure about who should (or can) provide leadership and a clear way forward. The fundamental question many are asking themselves (albeit subconsciously) is **how can we talk to our children about these issues, when perhaps not all adults are even on the same page?**

Despite this, what is almost universally agreed is that when sexual consent goes ‘wrong’, there are clear consequences both for males and females. There is a widespread recognition that the topic of **sexual consent needs to be taught and addressed as part of the normal development of young Australians**. And, that adults (family, carers, community, setting influencers) have an important role to play in this regard.

*“I’d really like my son to ask [for consent] ...I don’t know if he does or not, but I would like to think that the boys we’re bringing up now, that we educate them so that they will ask the question, and I feel that will my protect my daughters...because I worry about them too.”*

*“We can’t wait... in today’s age...to talk to children [about consent] when they are older.”*

*“We need to prepare them with the skills and knowledge up front – prepare them for the future.”*

*“It’s difficult but we have to push ourselves to make it more comfortable and, put ourselves in that uncomfortable position because it’s important. It feels new to actually have the conversations... when your kids are young it seems so far removed from where they’re at.”*

**How these conversations manifest themselves is, however, less clear.** While there is strong desire among adults for conversations about consent, the potential for there to be ‘personal costs’ associated with this appear high. In fact, **two in five (43%) of adult influencers agree that ‘if I saw or overheard something like this [a non-consensual act], I wouldn’t say or do anything ...even if I wanted to’**. These perceptions of cost appear higher among males (47%) when compared to females (40%).



Figure: Perception of personal costs	
Q: If I saw / overheard something like this, I wouldn't say or do anything ...even if I wanted to (6-10/10 agreement)	n=2031 %
All respondents	43
Males (n=936)	47*
Females (n=1,083)	40
18-34 male (n=174)	55*
35-54 male (n=306)	50*
55+ male (n=456)	41
18-34 female (n=432)	41
35-54 female (n=414)	38
55+ female (n=237)	41
Setting influencer (n=253)	52
Close influencer (n=615)	45

\* Significantly different relative to other sub-groups at 95% confidence interval

There are a **range of personal costs anticipated** which are summarised below and described on the pages that follow:

- **Consent can be a difficult conversation to navigate** ...particularly if not all adults are on the same page, if it is considered to rely on a set of personal values rather than a clear definition, and there is a risk of misinterpreting the 'fine line'.
- There is **fear of making situations worse** by talking about consent ...either for oneself, or for one's child.
- There is **no 'roadmap' or guidance for how to talk to young people** about consent ...particularly when the extent of knowledge of young people feels unknown, the extent to which learning it is a passage to adulthood, if there is concern regarding whether young people have complex or unanswerable questions, and knowing how to find guidance on 'when' to start having conversations.

### 6.3 Consent isn't necessarily difficult...but navigating sexual consent is

For many Australian parents, influencers, siblings and grandparents, talking and thinking about (non-sexual) consent appears relatively straightforward. There is a comparative ease around educating young children about the general topic of consent – particularly a feeling among many parents and grandparents that from a very early age, children can (and should) be taught agency over their own bodies and decisions, and a right to speak up about what they do or don't want to happen. In fact, many adults and parents report looking for early, "teachable moments" about respecting the wishes and personal boundaries of children, which includes finding simple and clear examples of what consent looks like.

*"I'm conscious of the fact that if I cuddle or handle my grandchildren, if at any time they say stop, we respect it."*



*“Sexual consent - that idea doesn't come out of nowhere. You can start very young, and it doesn't have to be about body stuff either. In pre-schools they teach you about 'yes feelings' and 'no feelings' – if people touch you or kissing the grandparents when they don't want to – that sort of thing.”*

*“If you're going to explain it to a kid you wouldn't start by giving them a definition, you would just show, tell them what consent means.... like sharing your toys, for example, or finding a way to show that you are agreeing on something.”*

However, when the overlay of sex is introduced, the topic of consent becomes considerably more difficult to talk about, with much higher levels of avoidance and discomfort. There are some social norms evident about not speaking openly about consent, and so in most cases, **sexual consent is not felt to be a topic that would generally arise between adults, parents and influencers**, and equally, that it would be a **hard topic to raise “out of the blue” with children**.

*“Sex is still so secret and not talked about...so education is so important.”*

*“Not something you talk about openly in a general conversation...”*

*“it's not really something you see and discuss all the time, with other people.”*

Fundamentally, **the topic of sexual consent is considered subjective** – something which can be based on **personal belief systems** of individuals and, a topic which is potentially **easy to misinterpret**.

## 6.4 The fear of making things worse for our children

There is also significant weight attached to being able to have conversations with younger people about sexual consent – parents and influencers understand that **there are potential 'downstream' impacts** – in effect, **if we get these educational conversations wrong now, the problems and consequences will be borne by young people**. At a rational level, the need to drive this conversation forward is clear, but the fear of getting it wrong can feel paralysing, or lead to delays and avoidance.

*“Things felt a lot easier when I didn't have to think about all this stuff. The more I hear and learn about the topic of consent, the more I worry about how to engage with my kids on this...”*

*“My mother tried to have a talk with me when I was 16... it was a very awkward conversation.”*

## 6.5 Knowing the 'right time' to have the conversation

**Finding the 'right time'** to meaningfully engage with children about sexual consent is also not considered straightforward. Many parents and influencers believe they shouldn't leave the conversation until their children are 'too old', but there is also fear of having sexual consent conversations 'too early'.

The question of 'when to talk to children' is felt to involve subjective and nuanced judgements, with **parents often reflecting on the perceived maturity or readiness of children to learn**



**about sexual consent.** In short, many perceive no single age that feels universally ‘right’ to start talking about sexual consent, which can lead to avoidance and deferral. Many parents feel they need to wait for young people to have a level of maturity, social skills and the ability to start to understand the ‘grey areas’ around consent that even they (as adults and influencers) can perceive as difficult. This aside, there was a general perception among parents that between 10-11 years old was potentially the most appropriate age to start a conversation with most young people and that the conversation could naturally evolve in terms of content post this initial conversation.

*“With consent, it’s not really clear from any age...when it should or shouldn’t be discussed... it’s fluid...circumstances can change, and they can change at the drop of a hat. That’s where there can be some confusion or misunderstanding.”*

*“They might have been sexually active for years and because someone suddenly called them out on it, then they’re enquiring about consent. So, they could already be 17 at that point and have been sexually active for 4 or 5 years ...it’s too late.”*

*“We should be able to talk to them when they are old enough – but by then it could be a bit too late.”*

## 6.6 Exposure of low knowledge – young people may know more

A further challenge for many parents and influencers is the belief that today’s children and young adults are grappling with a different (potentially more difficult) space to navigate around relationships, dating and sex.

Many perceive that issues including (but not limited to) sexualised imagery on social media, sexting, dating apps, and access/availability of pornography can make the situation harder (but potentially also more pressing at the same time). **Many express concern they aren’t necessarily equipped to deal with the broader issues that the consent discussion may raise,** and potentially, that young people will have questions that they can’t answer, or that **children will know more than they do.**

*“The arena in which they navigate themselves with internet and all the influences... all of the things that influence their decision-making – they’re expected to be far more worldly and wise about everything at a much earlier age than any generation before them ... it is a more complex world that they live in than we grew up in.”*

*“...I think they know more [about consent] than I do...”*

*“I just Googled some of those questions ...and Google actually gave me better answers than my Dad would.”*

*“Making sure she’d never meet up with a boy by herself that she’s met on Snapchat, that she’d have a group of friends with her. It’s all beyond what I needed to think about back when I might have met a boy at a school social.”*

*“Boys can have a misconstrued idea from porn, like the girl will open the door and the next thing she’ll be [into it] ...boys are exposed to this from 11, 12, 13 and it normalises stuff that isn’t right.”*



## 6.7 Uncertainty whether consent should be ‘taught’ or ‘learned’

For some parents and influencers, there is also a **question as to whether sexual consent is something that needs to be developed and learned naturally** – while there is acknowledgement that it may be able to be taught, there is also a question whether there is a need for young people find their own way. In part, this is driven by the perception of many adults that this is how they, themselves, learned about consent – through experience rather than through education.

*“There’s always an element of difficulty with it, trying to find that fine line between letting the kids explore and have those interactions and not snow ploughing or helicoptering for them, and keeping them safe.”*

*“When I was a bit younger, I had no idea how to read a woman or what the signs were ...but with a bit of time and experience you just learn all that stuff.”*

## 6.8 Absence of generational modelling

Many males and females reflect on the fact that they had **little to no guidance or role modelling about consent when they were growing up**, and that even when this role modelling existed, the environment has changed considerably over the years. Having never been through this conversation for themselves, the starting point can appear unclear as there is no foundational experience of having the conversation for them to base their way forwards.

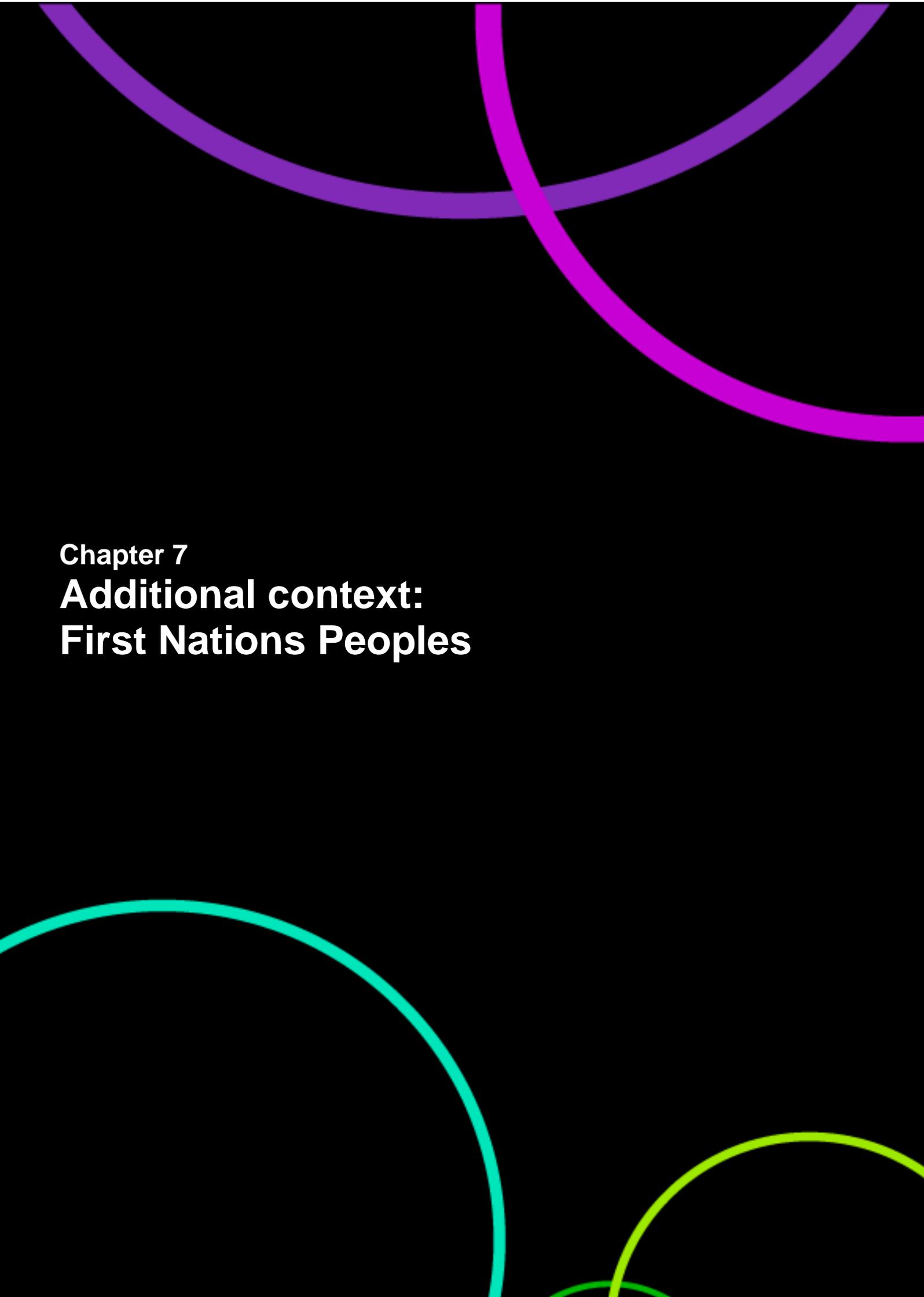
*“It’s not easy, because it’s not something we grew up with, it wasn’t spoken about. You kind of dealt with it [consent] by just having to say no, but now I don’t think that’s right.”*

*“My parents never talked to me about it, I just had to figure it out myself.”*

*“You’re trained not to think about it ...so it’s really hard for us...it hasn’t been role modelled by our parents.”*

## 6.9 Strategic implication

The presence of ‘more questions than answers’ about consent risks avoidance of conversations with young people for fear of not achieving a positive outcome. However, consent is not an easy question to answer – it is something that needs to be internalised and processed such that a mutual understanding is achieved.



**Chapter 7**  
**Additional context:**  
**First Nations Peoples**



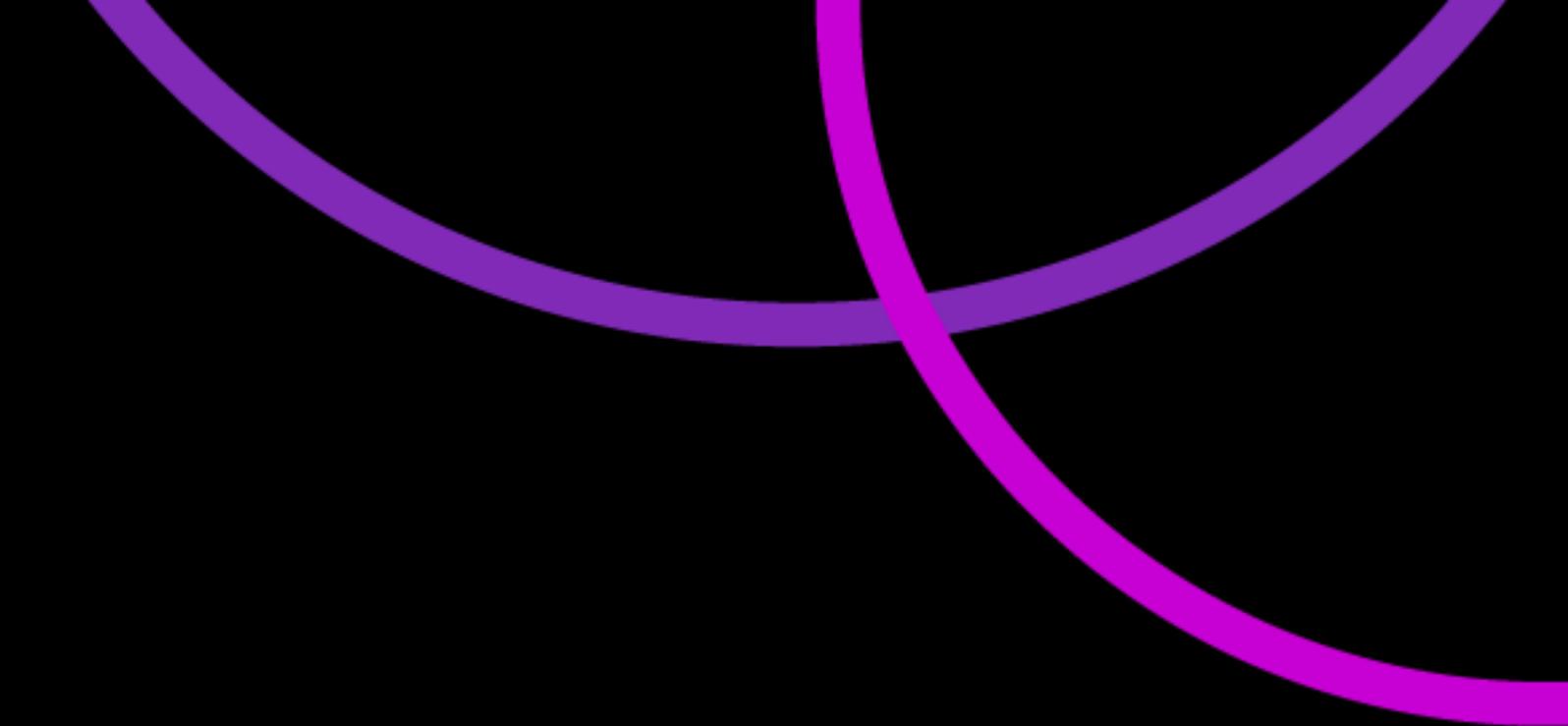
## 7. Additional Context: First Nations Peoples

The fundamental challenges associated with consent, as described through the preceding chapters of this report, are consistent and valid among Indigenous audiences.

Four additional factors were, however, present:

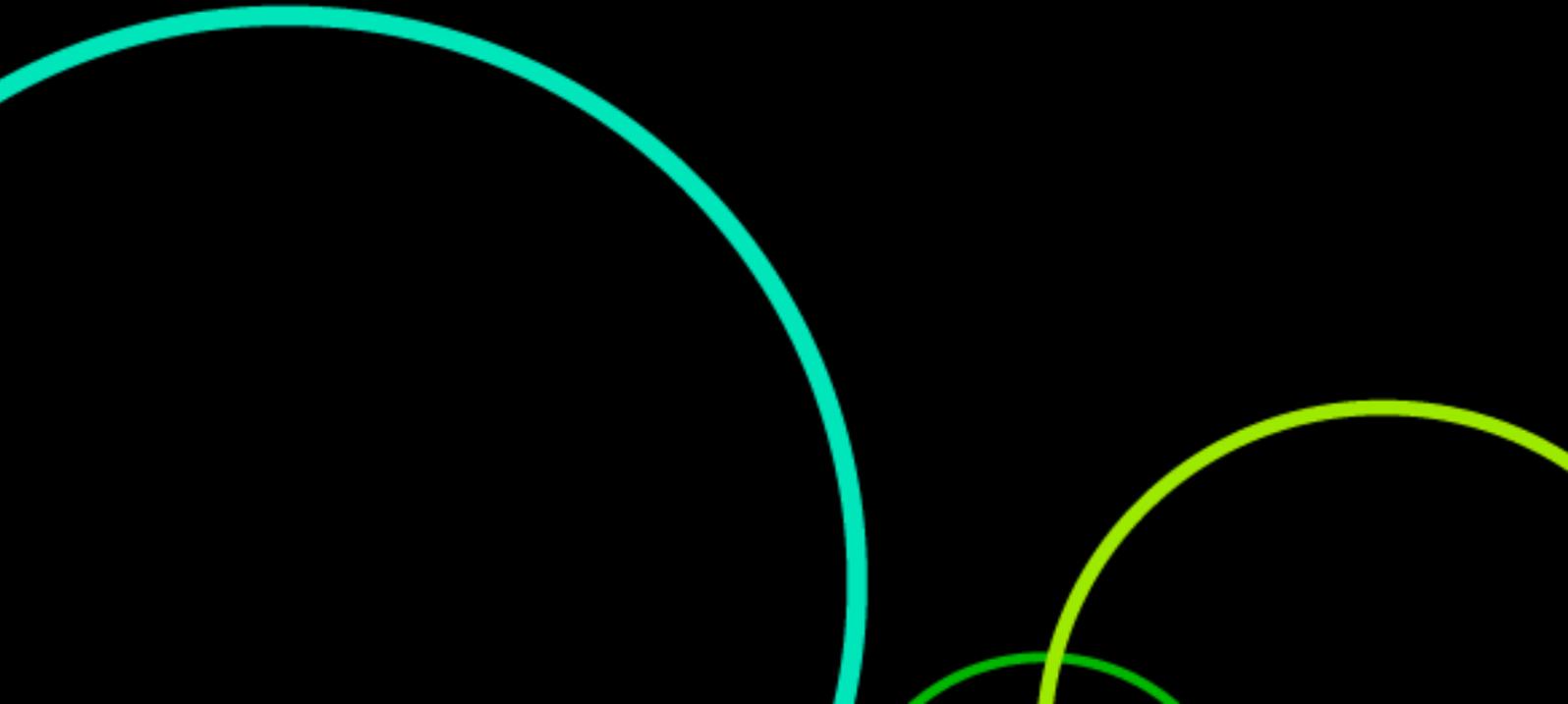
- **Personal and intimate:** While the topic of consent is considered highly personal and intimate among non-Indigenous and Indigenous audiences alike, this acknowledgement is comparatively more prominent among Indigenous audiences. When describing the topic of sexual consent, it is considered a conversation that would likely only occur between close individuals (family or peers) and was therefore not a topic that would currently be discussed at a broader community level.
- **Gendered:** Among non-Indigenous and Indigenous audiences, there was a perception that conversations relating to consent between adults and young people would more naturally occur as 'male to male' or 'female to female'. This was, however, more pronounced among Indigenous audiences whereby it was felt that conversations relating to consent would almost exclusively occur within gender. And, that while fathers may 'want' to talk to daughters about consent, it was considered more appropriate for this conversation to be initiated by mothers (similarly, for conversations between fathers and sons).
- **Emotive:** Among Indigenous audiences, the topic of consent was described as something that is highly emotional, and that the emotion attached to it made conversations difficult – within, and between, genders.
- **Protection:** The topic of consent appears slightly more about 'protection' of females, and supporting females to protect themselves from non-consensual behaviour, as opposed to addressing problem behaviours.

Overall, **consent is considered a vital topic among Indigenous influencers**. There is a strong desire for prevention to help avoid issues associated with consent. Given the complexities and sensitivities of sexual consent, it is noted that the topic of 'consent' requires intervention strategies, as well as communication.



Chapter 8

**Additional context:  
Culturally and Linguistically Diverse  
audiences**





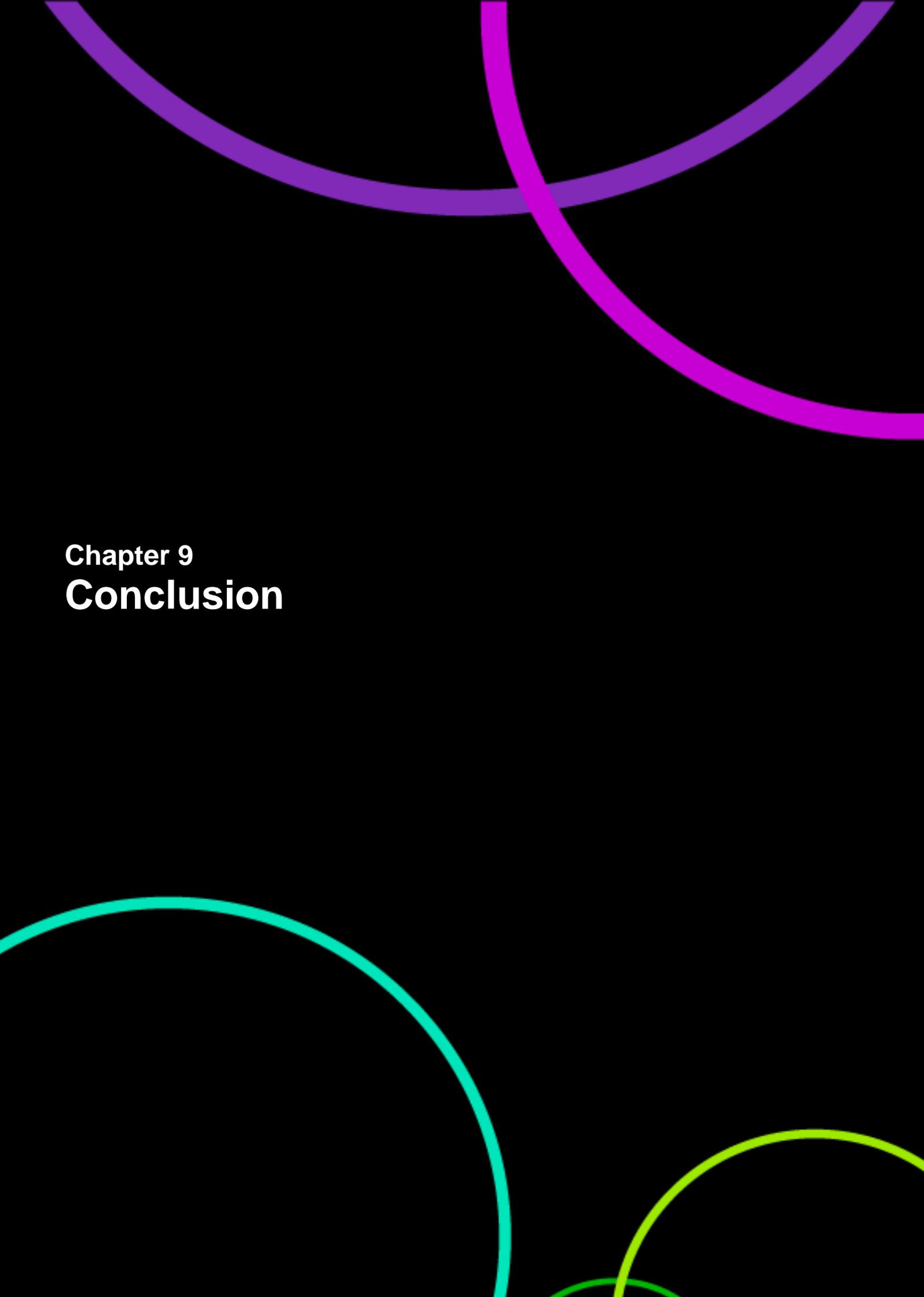
## 8. Additional Context: Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) audiences

The fundamental challenges associated with consent, as described through the preceding chapters of this report, are consistent and valid among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse audiences.

However, **three additional factors** below should be taken into consideration:

- **Embarrassment:** Some CALD audiences describe a sense of embarrassment when talking about the concept of consent, considering it something you might – at most – discuss with a close friend, but are potentially likely to discuss with a child or partner. There was also a perception that the topic of consent would not be talked about publicly. This aside, however, many CALD participants indicated that the injection of a ‘stimulus’ for conversation (such as a resource, a television ad etc) may alleviate the potential embarrassment of starting a conversation.
- **Protection:** Among CALD audiences, the topic of consent appears more about ‘protection’ of females, and supporting females to protect themselves from non-consensual behaviour, as opposed to addressing or preventing problem behaviours of males.
- **Gendered:** Among non-CALD and CALD audiences, there was a tendency to perceive that conversations relating to consent between adults and young people would more naturally occur as ‘male to male’ or ‘female to female’. This was, however, more pronounced among CALD (and, Indigenous) audiences whereby it was felt that conversations relating to consent would almost exclusively occur within gender. And, that while fathers may ‘want’ to talk to daughters about consent, it was considered more appropriate for this conversation to be initiated by mothers (similarly, for conversations between fathers and sons).

Overall, **consent is considered an important topic among CALD audiences**. There is a strong desire for prevention to help avoid issues associated with consent. Given the complexities and sensitivities of sexual consent, it is noted that the topic of ‘consent’ requires intervention strategies, as well as communication.



Chapter 9  
**Conclusion**



## 9. Consent – the heart of the issue

Sexual consent is a topic of high importance, and one that has changed over the years. However, while the conversation of sexual consent is more likely now to be on people's 'radars', it is no more likely to be a concept that has mutual understanding and clearly defined elements. As a topic, it feels confused, complex, weighty and risky ...for males and females alike.

The perceived complexities and lack of understanding mean that consent is often considered an 'unresolvable problem'. It is considered a subjective 'grey area' ...it can be thought of as something that is 'blown out of proportion' ...it can be seen as something that divides rather than unites males and females ...and there can be a perception that thinking about it can ultimately risk making life 'more complex'. As a result, people look for reasons not to engage deeply.

Australian adults have many questions about sexual consent ...*but*, ultimately, they hold them silently. Many feel paralysed in having conversations with young people, because it is understandably difficult to talk about something you are not confident you know intimately within yourself. It is considered too risky and even against social norms to initiate a conversation about consent with others. However, when conversations are held, confidence manifests, mutual benefits are experienced, and there is a greater willingness to openly share, learn collaboratively, and grow ...including with younger generations.



**Australian Government**  
**Department of Social Services**

## **About the Department of Social Services (DSS)**

The mission of DSS is to improve the wellbeing of individuals and families in Australian communities.

DSS helps contribute to a significant and sustained reduction in violence against women and their children in Australia, through the implementation of the current *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022* and the upcoming *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032* in partnership with state and territory governments and other key stakeholders.

DSS also works with the Office for Women and other portfolios across government to advance gender equality and improve the status and wellbeing of women in Australia.

For further information please contact: DSS Media [media@dss.gov.au](mailto:media@dss.gov.au) 02 6146 8080 or visit [www.dss.gov.au](http://www.dss.gov.au)

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